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THE FATHERHOOD OF GOD.

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OF late years much has been said about the Fatherhood of God. Since F. D. Maurice and F. W. Robertson impressed their religious views on the English-speaking public, the doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God, and the corresponding doctrine of the universal sonship of men, have been proclaimed as a new, or rediscovered, truth of the gospel of Christ. Dr. Watson, in his readable book *The Mind of the Master*, says: "Two finds have been made within recent years: the divine Fatherhood and the kingdom of God" (p. 318).

If so important a truth has hitherto been lost, and has now been brought to light, it is certainly something to be profoundly grateful for. But the manner in which the alleged discovery is proclaimed cannot but provoke the inquiry, whether the novelty of it has not after all been too much magnified; or, in case there is any novelty about it, whether the novelty is an improvement. In some quarters it seems to be thought that, in the department of philosophical or theological thought, a proposition should be esteemed in proportion to its newness, just as dry-goods dealers evidently expect to attract customers by advertising an article as the "latest novelty."

That God has been conceived as a Father throughout the course of Christian history is a truth so patent that no one

would think of denying it. The Lord's Prayer, repeated over and over in private and in public ever since our Saviour first taught it, would, even if there were nothing else, have been enough to make it impossible for the conception to become obsolete. What possibility, then, it may be asked, is there of any new discovery in regard to this feature of Christian thought? The answer which most readily occurs is that the application of the name "Father" to God is now made *universal*, instead of being limited, as in the Old Testament, to the Jewish people, or, as in Christian theology, to the regenerate, or the elect. And then the correlative conception is emphasized, that *all* men, and not merely *some* men, are the children of God.

But after all this does not fully answer the question. For in some sense the universal Fatherhood of God has certainly been a general tenet of the Christian church from the beginning. The first article in the Apostles' Creed designates God as "the Father almighty, Maker of heaven and earth." The appellation is quite general, connecting God the Father, not with any particular part of the human race, but with the whole universe, "Father" and "Maker" being apparently used as synonymous. Bishop Pearson, commenting on this, says: "Wherever God hath been acknowledged, he hath been understood and worshiped as a Father; the very heathen poets so describe their gods; and their vulgar names did carry *father* in them, as the most popular and universal notion." Some thirty years ago, after Dr. Candlish, in his *Cunningham Lectures*, had advocated the proposition that God's Fatherhood, according to reason and Scripture, can be properly predicated only of his relation to Christ and Christians, Professor Crawford, of Edinburgh, published an elaborate reply, at the opening of which he remarks: "The prevalent opinion of the Christian church has ever been that all mankind may be held to be the children of God—as deriving their existence from him—as created after his likeness—as still retaining some traces of his image, though grievously defaced and distorted by the fall—and as largely partaking of his providential care and bounty. I am not aware,

indeed, that this general Fatherhood of God has ever hitherto been formally controverted."

So then, according to these weighty authorities, the doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God has until recent times never been questioned, whereas Dr. Watson assures us that it is only within recent times that the doctrine has been discovered! The apparently irreconcilable contradiction between these two positions can be at all relieved only by a closer consideration of the definitions that have been given to the term in question. Principal A. M. Fairbairn, in his book *The Place of Christ in Modern Theology*, speaking of Dr. Crawford's definition of the divine Fatherhood, says that "all that we have is a figurative and euphonious way of describing creation and providence" (p. 445). Dr. Fairbairn argues that God is Father, not in a merely figurative, but in a real sense. "Fatherhood," he says, "did not come through creation, but rather creation because of Fatherhood. The essential love out of which creation issued determined the standing of the created before the Creator and the relation of the Creator to the created. Where love is causal it is paternal" (*ibid.*). So then the question is settled by a new definition of fatherhood. Heretofore the general opinion has been that a father in the strict sense is a male human being who has begotten a child. A man is not a father till the child has come into existence. And so far as paternal love forms an element of paternity, it, too, is not developed till after the child is born. But Dr. Fairbairn turns the thing end for end. Paternity and paternal love, according to him, precede and produce the child. Applied to human relations the proposition amounts to this: A man is a father as soon as he forms the intention of begetting children. And that which causes him to form the intention is his love for the as yet non-existent children! Such talk, seriously uttered with reference to the human relation of father and child, would be called balderdash. But uttered with reference to God's relation to men it undoubtedly has to many ears the sound of great profundity. Yet, as a definition of fatherhood in general, if there is any validity in it, it ought to be applicable to human paternity. For surely the original

conception of paternity came from the human relation of men to their offspring. *This* is *real* paternity. But Dr. Fairbairn, in order to prove that God is literally, and not merely in a figurative sense, a Father to men, invents such a definition of fatherhood that if we accept it we must conclude that nobody but God has ever been a father! That makes the demonstration easy; but it also makes it worthless.

Whether it is true that God created because he loved, it is not necessary to decide. There is no biblical warrant for the notion; but there may be a truth in it. Be that as it may, it makes no difference with the question before us. No one doubts the fact of the divine love as exercised toward men after they have been created. And because God has made men, and cherishes for them a love like that of a father for his children, he may be fitly called their Father. This designation, however, is inadequate. God may be *called* a Father, but he is more than that. Many other names, borrowed from human or physical relations, are used to describe the indescribable majesty and love of God. They all serve a purpose; but all together fall far short of the end of telling what God is in himself or to his creatures. When, now, it is attempted to make out that Fatherhood is the final and exhaustive idea of God, and when, in order to prove it, a definition of fatherhood is invented which contradicts the universal conception of what fatherhood is, one is tempted to ask, "Who is this that darkeneth counsel by words without knowledge?"

The literal and proper sense of fatherhood, I repeat, must be found in the human relation of father and child. If anyone else is called father besides the male parent of a human child, the term is used in a derivative, tropical, or improper sense. It is quite admissible to call some venerable and beloved pastor "Father" So-and-so, or to call Washington the father of his country. It is perfectly intelligible when one speaks of a wish as being father to a thought. These and other applications of the term are figurative; they convey a meaning because in the relations here spoken of there is something *analogous* to the normal relation which subsists between a father and

child. But if anyone should undertake to find in some one of these *derivative* senses the primary and *proper* sense of the word, he would be only introducing obscurity and confusion. Now the application of the name "Father" to the Supreme Being is a very natural one. But it is a secondary, derivative use of the term. When we call God our Father, the expression has a meaning only as some aspects of human fatherhood are presupposed and regarded as typical of God's relation to men. In short, God is our Father in a figurative sense. The attempt to find the literal and essential meaning of fatherhood in God's relation to us may present the appearance of profoundness, but it is a futile attempt; putting the figurative for the literal does not make it the literal. The tropical use of a word may be quite legitimate and even necessary; but nevertheless it is indispensable to clearness of thought that the literal and the tropical senses of a word should not be confounded.

There are three distinct senses in which God is called Father in the Scriptures. (1) He is in a very special sense called the Father of Jesus Christ. Whatever may be the meaning of the passages which speak of this relation, it is clear that there is something unique in it. No one else is son to God in the same sense in which Jesus is. He is *the* Son, as no one else is; and God is his Father, as he is Father to no one else. In speaking to his disciples he calls God "your Father;" and in speaking of God he says "my Father;" but he never associates himself with his disciples, saying of God "our Father." Even if we follow those who regard Jesus' Sonship as beginning with his birth from Mary, still his Sonship is unique. But when we regard the Sonship as belonging to the eternal Logos, the Second Person of the Trinity, the uniqueness of his Sonship is much more marked. That is a relation which belongs to no one else. (2) Next, God is called Father of the redeemed, or the regenerate, as distinguished from men in general. In this sense of the word Christ calls God the Father of his followers; and Paul says (Rom. 8: 15) that Christians have received the spirit of adoption, whereby they cry "Abba, Father." No one questions the fact of this special application of the name "Father"

to Christians. (3) Finally, God is called Father of men in general. In this case the appellation is derived from the universal benevolence which God exercises toward his human creatures, made in his image. He loves as a good father loves, even when the persons loved do not exercise filial love in return.

So far there seems to be nothing respecting which there need be any serious disagreement. And one may well wonder why there should have been so much parade made over the alleged discovery of the divine Fatherhood. So far as the two first mentioned applications of the name "Father" are concerned, there is certainly no material difference of opinion among ordinary Christians. It is with reference to the third particular—the universal Fatherhood of God—that credit is claimed for the school of Maurice. Even here, however, as we have seen, no real discovery has been made. God created men and exercises toward them love and guardian care. Therefore he may appropriately be called the Father of all men, since there is an obvious analogy between his relation to men and that of a man to the children whom he has procreated and whom he loves and cherishes. The disagreement, so far as there is any, relates not so much to the Fatherhood of God as to the correlative doctrine of the *sonship of men*. Are all men the children of God in the same sense in which God is the Father of all men? If God is the Father of men in a *literal* sense, then of course men are his children in a literal sense. But if God is the Father of men in a *figurative* sense—so called because he resembles a normal father in his relation to his children—it does not follow that all men are equally the children of God. In order to be such they must resemble, in their relation to God, *normal* children in relation to a literal father. If mere creation constitutes God our Father, then of course the matter is settled—all men are his children. But those whose views we are considering are not satisfied with this solution of the matter. Dr. Watson, though he does not seem to adopt Dr. Fairbairn's conception, yet says: "When Jesus speaks of Fatherhood, it is almost a stupidity to explain that he is not thinking of any physical relation—the 'offspring' of the heathen poets, and that Father is not a

synonym for Creator" (p. 262). "The bond between son and father in the spiritual world is ethical," he says. "Jesus rested his own Sonship on community of character" (*ibid.*). Here then it is distinctly asserted that the biblical conception of Fatherhood has nothing to do with physical relationship, and that sonship means ethical community of character. And it seems inevitable to conclude, since this community of character is not a general fact, as between God and men, that men generally are *not* children of God. But instead of taking this logical step, Dr. Watson goes on to remark that, while the bond between Father and Son in the Trinity is perfect, "it is only a suggestion between a sinner and God"—a "capability," a "possibility." But if sonship *consists* in community of character, then there is no sonship until there *is* community of character. To say that all men are children of God because there is in them the *possibility* of becoming such is like saying that a rough block of marble is a bust of Shakespeare because such a bust may be chiseled out of it.

And yet it is insisted that it is an almost brand-new discovery of recent times that all men are by natural birth children of God. When clearness of thought is attempted, however, it is admitted that sonship means spiritual likeness to God, that men by natural birth do not possess this ethical oneness with God, and that consequently they are not *actually*, but only *potentially*, children of God. But did anyone ever deny that? Mr. F. W. Robertson, however, in his sermons on Baptism, says that this rite does not *make* men children of God, but *proclaims* them to be such. "Man is God's child," he says, "and the sin of the man consists in perpetually living as if it were false." The confusion of thought here is similar to that which characterizes Dr. Watson's remarks. What is meant by saying that men live as if their being children of God were a falsehood? It can mean nothing else than that their life is not the life of children of God. But if so, then what else is meant than that they are *not* children of God? No, it will be rejoined, this is not meant; they *are* children of God, but they are unfilial, apostate children. Indeed; but what does this mean? Apostasy implies a previous loyalty.

Is it meant that they have lapsed from a genuinely filial state into an unfilial one? that they were once normal children, but are now abnormal ones? No, this is not meant either. Well, then, is it meant that all men are made in the image of God, having a spiritual nature akin to the divine, and capable, though depraved, of fellowship with God? Probably this is not far from what is meant. But if it is, then there is nothing new in the doctrine; it is old and trite. At the best, it can only be claimed that a new *name* is given to a familiar truth. But that is a very different thing from the discovery of a new truth, or the rediscovery of a lost one. It may, or may not be, desirable to call all men children of God, in order to indicate that God loves all men and desires that none should perish, but that all should be born again and have eternal life. But this makes the question simply one of terminology. One person says: All men are sinners, but may *become* children of God. The other says: All men are sinners, but nevertheless *are* children of God; only they need to find out that they are children, and live as children should. At bottom there is no difference between the two positions. Both acknowledge that the natural man needs regeneration. Both hold that only when he is regenerated can he be called a child of God in the full sense.

It is difficult, in view of this obvious state of the case, to understand why the doctrine of the universal sonship should be proclaimed with so much flourish. One writer¹ insists that, unless man is by nature a child of God, he must be regarded as nothing but an animal. And Dr. Fairbairn (p. 446) declares: "It is the emptiest nominalism to speak of the adoption of a man who never was a son; for the term can denote nothing real. The legal fiction has a meaning and a use only where it represents or pretends to represent something in the world of fact; but to speak of the 'adoption' of a creature who is in no respect a son is to use a term which is here without the saving virtue of sense." Surely this is a case in which strong assertion takes the place of strong thought. Adoption, in the common legal sense, means the investing of a person with the status and privileges

¹ DR. G. A. GORDON, *The Christ of Today*, p. 80.

of sonship, who previously has *not* been a son of the person adopting him. If the meaning of the sentence just quoted is that the person adopted must have been *a* son, *i. e.*, the son of *somebody*, though not of the one adopting him (and it is difficult to find any other meaning in it), then it seems very much like a quibble. Inasmuch as in the literal sense the person adopted is not a son of the person adopting until the adoption takes place, it certainly seems necessarily to follow that, when the figure of adoption is used of God in relation to men, the meaning must be that the state of sonship *begins with the adoption*. To say that so simple and incontrovertible a proposition as this is "without the saving virtue of sense" is more likely to betray the weakness of the argument in whose interest the assertion is made than it is to frighten those whose views are thus denounced.

But the doctrine of the universal sonship of men is heralded as not only a recent discovery, but also as being the real, though forgotten, doctrine of the New Testament, and especially of Jesus Christ. It is worth while, therefore, to take a survey of the teaching of the New Testament on the point in question, and see precisely what it is. Let us begin with the passages which speak of God as Father. And first, those which occur in the gospels.

Here we may at the outset throw out of consideration all those passages in which God is called Father only in relation to Jesus Christ. There is no doubt that in some peculiar sense Jesus is called the Son of God, and that correspondingly God is called the Father of Jesus. Accordingly, when Jesus calls God "my Father," as he does in a large proportion of the cases in which he speaks of God, we can draw no inference as to God's Fatherhood in relation to men in general. The same is ordinarily to be said of the passages in which Christ speaks of God as "the Father;" *e. g.*, John 5:20, "For the Father loveth the Son." This phrase in the gospel of John is more frequent than "my Father," but is synonymous with it. So also in Matt. 11:27; 24:36; 28:32; Mark 13:32; Luke 10:22, the only instances in the other gospels. There are few cases in which the phrase "the Father" is not used in obvious reference to

Christ as Son. The most noteworthy case perhaps is John 4:21-23. Here Jesus says to the Samaritan woman: "The hour cometh, when neither in this mountain nor in Jerusalem shall ye worship the Father." Here, and in the verse in which he describes what kind of worship "the Father" desires, the term is not by the connection limited, in its relation, to Christ as Son. The only question is, whether God is here designated as the universal Father, or whether he is called the Father especially of those who worship him. The context does not absolutely decide this point. It is a case on which we must look for light to the general usage of the New Testament and especially of Christ himself. There is no other instance in the gospels in which "the Father" can so plausibly be understood to have a universal reference. *E. g.*, when Philip (John 14:8) says, "Lord, show us the Father," we observe that it immediately follows Christ's statement, "If ye had known me ye would have known my Father also." Philip's "the Father" is evidently the same as Christ's "my Father."

We turn now to the passages in which God is directly called the Father of others than Jesus Christ. The most numerous of these are found in Matthew's gospel, and here chiefly in the Sermon on the Mount. In this sermon Christ speaks sixteen times of God as the Father of those addressed. The question to be settled is how extensively the appellation is meant to be understood. It certainly cannot be taken for granted that Christ here means to assert the absolute universality of the Fatherhood of God. The sermon is said (Matt. 5:1) to have been addressed to Christ's "disciples." It is true we read that there were "multitudes" present; and at the close of the sermon it is said "the multitudes were astonished at his teaching; for he taught them as one having authority." But this does not neutralize the explicit declaration that the sermon was addressed to the "disciples," as distinguished from the "multitudes." A lawyer in a court-room *addresses* the jury. He is *heard* by the multitude who come as spectators. What he says to the jury cannot be understood as necessarily applicable to the general audience. If it is argued that, when Christ in addressing his disciples calls

God *their* Father, he must have been *understood* as *implying* that God was the Father of all men, this can be made out only when it is proved that the universal Fatherhood of God was already a familiar conception and belief of the Jews. But of this there is no evidence whatever. At the most they may have been accustomed to think of God as the Father of the Jews. In the Old Testament God is sometimes called the Father of his chosen people. But he is there nowhere called the Father of all mankind. It is *possible*, then, that Christ's hearers, when he spoke of God as Father, may have understood him to use the term in this Old Testament sense. But there is no ground for supposing that they could have understood him to use it in a wider sense, unless he explicitly said that he so meant it. But he nowhere does so.

The remaining passages in Matthew are 10:20; 13:43; 18:14, and 23:9. In the first three the persons addressed are expressly said to be Christ's disciples; and there is nothing in his use of the name "Father" to suggest that he means it to be understood in a general sense. But the passage 23:9 occurs in a discourse which is said (vs. 1) to have been addressed "to the multitudes and to the disciples"—a fact that is noted by Dr. Watson (p. 260), who, however, fails to note that it is the *only* instance of this sort. He observes concerning the passage: "This attempt to restrict the intention of Jesus [with regard to the Fatherhood of God] is not of yesterday; it was the invention of the Pharisees. They detected the universal note in Jesus' teaching; they resented his unguarded charity." Now it is true that in this discourse Jesus very severely denounces the Pharisees and Scribes. He earnestly warns his hearers—"the multitudes and his disciples"—not to do after the works of those teachers. It is to these hearers, not to the Scribes and Pharisees, that he says, "One is your Father, which is in heaven." So then, if Dr. Watson is right in affirming that the great heresy of the Pharisees was the notion that they were sons of God while the publicans and sinners were not, Jesus here turns the tables, and *excludes* the Pharisees from the number of those to whom he said, "One is your Father." We therefore

still fail to find an assertion of the universal Fatherhood of God.

In the gospel of Mark there is only one instance in point (11:25); and here the address is said to be to the disciples of Jesus. In Luke the only cases are 6:36; 11:2, 13; 12:30, 32; and here also the persons addressed are expressly said to be Jesus' disciples. In John's gospel there is only one instance in which the phrase "your Father" occurs, viz., 20:17, "I ascend unto my Father and your Father." And this is said to the apostles. So far, then, we find in Jesus' language no unequivocal assertion that God is the Father of all men.

We come to the same result when we examine the other books of the New Testament. The general fact is that, when God is called Father, it is with reference either to Christ in particular or to Christ's disciples. When Paul in a benediction says, "Grace to you and peace from God our Father," the pronoun can legitimately be referred only to the person writing and the persons addressed. This observation applies to the larger number of cases in which Paul calls God "Father." There are a few passages in which God is called "Father" in a somewhat more indefinite way. Thus, Eph. 2:18, Paul says, "Through him [Christ] we both have our access in one Spirit unto the Father." But here Gentile and Jewish *Christians* are addressed; and there is no warrant for understanding "the Father" to mean the Father of all men. The same remark applies to 1 Cor. 8:6; Eph. 5:20; 6:23; Col. 1:12; 3:17; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Tim. 1:2; Titus 1:4; James 3:9; 1 Peter 1:2, 17; 1 John 1:2, 3; 2:1, 13, 15, 16, 22, 23, 24; 3:1. With regard to these latter instances (in John's epistle), it is perhaps more correct to suppose that, as in his gospel, John uses "Father" as antithetic to Christ the Son. So 2 John, vss. 3, 4, 9; Jude, vs. 1. There remain, however, one or two passages to be especially noted. In Eph. 4:6 we read, "One God and Father of all." This expression in form comes nearer than most others in the Bible to an ascription of universal Fatherhood to God. But it is to be noticed that Paul is here expressly speaking of the body of Christ, which is said to have "one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all," so that the most obvious

reference of "all" is to the members of the body of Christ. A more plausible proof text for the doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God is Eph. 3:14, 15, "I bow my knees unto the Father, from whom every family [race, tribe] in heaven and on earth is named." The interpretation is to some extent a matter of dispute. But it is clear, in the first place, that there is here a designed play on the words *πατήρ* and *πατριά*; and, in the next place, it is nearly certain that the latter word (with *πάντα*) has a universal application. It *can* be supposed to be limited to the families of *believers* in heaven and on earth; but the more obvious and probable meaning is that God is the Father of all the races of men. And accordingly we have here the clearest affirmation of the universal Fatherhood of God to be found in the New Testament. Yet it is to be noted that the ordinary conception of Fatherhood, as involving the new birth and adoption into the family of God, is not necessarily to be regarded as here excluded. In verse 6 Paul speaks of the Gentiles in general as "fellow heirs, and fellow members of the body, and fellow partakers of the promise in Christ Jesus." That is to say, they are spoken of as if all were already actually members of the body of Christ, although in point of fact only a few were. The language is ideal and proleptic; and so in 3:15 the Fatherhood of God may be described as universal in the same way—ideally, in the divine purpose of love, comprehending all races of men. So much at all events the passage does assert—that God is a universal Father in the sense that his paternal love embraces all his intelligent creatures.

In the epistle to the Hebrews (12:9) there is a passage which has been adduced as an assertion of the general Fatherhood of God: "We had the fathers of our flesh to chasten us, and we gave them reverence: shall we not much rather be in subjection to the Father of spirits and live?" There is a plain antithesis here between the human fathers and the heavenly Father. God is spoken of as related especially to our spiritual nature—possibly an allusion to Num. 16:22; 27:16, where Jehovah is called "the God of the spirits of all flesh." The word "Father" is naturally suggested in the Hebrews passage by the reference

to the human fathers ; and when God is called Father of spirits, the term is perhaps most naturally understood as equivalent to Creator, as in Job 38 : 28 we read, "Hath the rain a father? or who hath begotten the drops of dew?" The Greek has the article, so that it reads, "Father of the spirits;" and it may be rendered (with R. V. marg.) "Father of our spirits." That would certainly best correspond with the antithetic expression, "fathers of our flesh." In this case the name "Father" would have a limited application. At the most the phrase in question does not very distinctly, though it possibly does vaguely, assert the universal Fatherhood of God.

I am not aware that there are any other passages which have been adduced as proving the doctrine in question. It is noticeable that the clearest assertion of it is found in the epistles of Paul, not in the words of Christ. Christ nowhere, unless in the very doubtful passage, John 4 : 21, 23, speaks of God as the universal Father. When he is especially addressing the Pharisees, or those who are not in sympathy with him, he *never calls God their Father*. If the doctrine of the universal Fatherhood of God is so vital and fundamental as it is asserted to be, it is strange that Christ should not at least once have clearly affirmed it. But there is *not a solitary instance of the sort*. Yet, in spite of this, Dr. Watson makes bold to say (p. 257): "When one passes from the gospels to the Psalms, he is struck by the absence of Father. When one returns, he is struck by its presence. The psalmist never said the word; Jesus never said anything else. With Jesus God and Father were identical. Fatherhood was not a side of Deity; it was the center." When we consider that, apart from the Sermon on the Mount, there are only about half a dozen occasions on which Christ is said to have used the name "Father" with reference to men, and then only with reference to his followers, we are able to judge how much weight is to be attached to these sweeping assertions.

"People with dogmatic ends to serve," says Dr. Watson, "have striven to believe that Jesus reserved Father for the use of his disciples; but an ingenuous person could hardly make the discovery in the gospels. One searches in vain to find that

Jesus had an esoteric word for his intimates, and an exoteric for the people, saying Father to John and Judge to the publicans" (p. 260). But such an assertion, unaccompanied by proof, can hardly be regarded as demonstrative, even when fortified by an imputation of bad motives to those who take the other side. The question can be settled only by an inductive study of the biblical usage. The foregoing examination has shown pretty conclusively that Jesus did not indiscriminately call God the Father of all men. Dr. Watson makes only one attempt to prove his point by a specific quotation, that is, when he calls attention to the "multitudes" who are associated with the "disciples" in Matt. 23:1. But a close view of the passage shows that Christ (in vss. 2-12) is addressing those who are assumed to be his followers: "One is your Teacher, and all ye are brethren." The word "disciples" undoubtedly means here, as it often does (*e. g.*, 10:1; 11:1; 12:1), the twelve apostles, and the "multitude" denotes the wider circle of Jesus' disciples. And in any case, as we have already seen, he expressly distinguishes his auditors from the Scribes and Pharisees, so that when he adds to the words quoted above, "And call no man your father on the earth, for one is your Father, which is in heaven," we certainly cannot understand the Fatherhood as here declared to be universal.

So then, when it is affirmed that "one searches in vain to find that Jesus had an esoteric word for his intimates and an exoteric for the people," the reply is that one searches in vain for any proof of the opposite. But more than this: When it is intimated that Christ nowhere suggests that his application of the term "Father" is not as broad as the whole human race, it is sufficient to refer to John 8:41, 42. Here we read that certain of the Jews, in their dispute with Jesus, said to him, "We were not born of fornication; we have one Father, even God." And what is Jesus' reply? "If God were your Father ye would love me." And in vs. 44 he adds, "ye are of your father the devil." It would be difficult to find a more explicit declaration that God is *not* the Father of all men than this. This passage shows that Jesus' conception of the Fatherhood of God is an

ethical one. Those who are alienated from him have not God, but the devil, for their father. One unequivocal utterance like this throws a flood of light on the question before us. *Here is a distinct assertion that the Fatherhood of God is not universal; and our Lord nowhere distinctly declares that it is universal.* This is the simple fact, and one does not need to have any "dogmatic ends to serve" in order to see it.

Let us now examine the New Testament passages which speak of men as the sons, or children, of God. And first, the gospels. The first instance is Matt. 5:9, "Blessed are the peacemakers; for they shall be called sons of God." This certainly does not apply to all men. Next, Matt. 5:44, 45, "Love your enemies, and pray for them that persecute you; that ye may be the sons of your Father which is in heaven." Here most emphatically sonship is made to consist in being like him who "maketh his sun to rise on the evil and the good." Christ does not say, "Love your enemies, seeing you *are* sons of God," but "in order that ye may *become* [γένησθε] sons of your Father which is in heaven." This passage shows that God may be called Father of one who is not, in the fullest sense at least, a child of God. Even though it may be urged that Christ is here speaking to his *disciples*, who are therefore conceived as already children of God, yet his language unmistakably represents them as not really, or not fully, children till they are like God. In the parable of the tares (Matt. 13:36-42) Christ distinguishes between "the sons of the kingdom" and "the sons of the evil one." This is not exactly an instance of men being called sons of God; but it is virtually that, and at any rate the application of the term is not universal. In Luke 6:35 we read, "Love your enemies and do them good, and lend, never despairing; and your reward shall be great, and ye shall be sons of the Most High." This is parallel with Matt. 5:45, and like that passage makes sonship consist in ethical likeness to God. In Luke 20:35, 36 Christ says that "they that are accounted worthy to attain to that world and the resurrection from the dead . . . are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection." Here again the designation is a limited one. These are all of the recorded

instances of Christ's use of the phrase in question. The other passages in the gospels bearing on the point before us are the following: In John 11:52 it is said of Caiaphas' words, that they involved a prophecy that Christ would "gather together into one all the children of God that are scattered abroad." Here, too, the application of the designation is obviously a restricted one. More important is John 1:12, where it is said: "But as many as received him, to them gave he the right to become children of God, even to them that believe on his name." This is explicit as an assertion that the sonship is *constituted* by faith. Those that receive Christ and believe on him have the right to *become* children of God. It is almost amusing to find Mr. Robertson (*Sermons*, second series, p. 87) referring to this passage as evidence that all men are by nature children of God. He repeatedly declares that every man is a son of God; but he adds, "To be a son of God is one thing; to know that you are, and call him Father, is another—and that is regeneration." According to this, however, John ought to have written, "As many as received him, to them gave he the right to learn that they have always been children of God."

There is, so far as I know, only one other passage in the gospels which has been appealed to in proof of the doctrine of the general sonship of men. It is Luke 3:38, where, at the close of the genealogy of Jesus, it is said of Adam that he was "the son of God." But obviously this passage fails to accomplish the purpose in question. It simply affirms that, whereas the other men mentioned had been procreated by a human father, Adam, having no human father, was created by God. That Adam is called *son* is simply enough explained by the natural desire of the writer to complete the genealogy by the use of the same form of expression which had been used all along before. But even if we give the greatest possible weight to the phraseology of the verse, it asserts only that *Adam* was the son of God, and cannot be pressed to involve the doctrine that all men are.

The gospels, therefore, and particularly the words of Christ, as recorded there, present not a single declaration to the effect

that all men are children of God. Wherever the conception is found, it clearly and unmistakably is limited to a portion of mankind. If now we turn to the other books, the result will be essentially the same. In Rom. 8:14 Paul says, "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God." In the next verse this is called "the spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, Abba, Father." Here, as in vss. 16 and 19, it is manifest that Paul is speaking of the regenerate. In 9:8 he is still more explicit: "It is not the children of the flesh that are children of God, but the children of the promise are reckoned for a seed." In 2 Cor. 6:18 Paul quotes from the Old Testament, "Come out from among them . . . and touch no unclean thing; and I will receive you, and will be to you a Father, and ye shall be to me sons and daughters." Here again the application is a limited one; and equally so in the similar quotation found in Rom. 9:26. In Gal. 3:26 we read, "For ye are all sons of God, through faith in Christ Jesus"—a declaration addressed to Christians and descriptive only of Christians. The same is to be said of Gal. 4:5-7 and Eph. 1:5, where again Christians are said to be *adopted* as sons—a conception which implies a previous state that was not sonship. The same remark applies to Eph. 5:1; Phil. 2:15; Heb. 2:10, 13, 14, and 12:5-8. In 1 John 3:1 the apostle says, "Behold, what manner of love the Father hath bestowed on us, that we should be called the children of God; and such we are." And in vs. 2 he adds, "Behold, now are we children of God, and it is not yet made manifest what we shall be." The same expression occurs in 5:2, "Hereby know we that we love the children of God, when we love God, and do his commandments." It is obvious that, as the epistle is addressed to Christians, the appellation "children of God" is intended to be applied to them. It is surprising that the statement, "Now are we children of God," could ever be quoted, as it has been, to prove that according to John all men are by nature God's children. The most superficial reading of the epistle is enough to show that John means by the "children of God" the same that is meant by "the begotten of God" of whom he speaks in 2:29; 3:9; 4:7; 5:1, 4, 18, and of whom

he affirms that they do not, and even cannot, sin. It certainly requires a powerful imagination to suppose that *this* affirmation is made of mankind in general. If there were still the shadow of a doubt as to the limitation of the term "children of God" to the regenerate, it would have to disappear when one reads 3:10, "In this the children of God are manifest, and the children of the devil: whosoever doeth not righteousness is not of God." John, then, it seems, conceives men to be divided into two classes—the children of God and the children of the devil—precisely as we have seen that Jesus himself did in his dispute with the Jews, John 8:42, 44. There remains but one more passage in the New Testament, so far as I know, in which the children of God are spoken of, viz., Rev. 21:7; and here, too, they are sharply distinguished from the wicked.

There is, however, a passage in Paul's address at Athens (Acts 17:28, 29) which has been cited as teaching that all men are the children of God. Paul quotes the poet Aratus as saying of God, "For we are also his offspring." And then he adds, "Being then the offspring of God, we ought not to think that the Godhead is like unto gold, or silver, or stone, graven by art and device of man." Although the word "sons" or "children" is not used, yet this proposition, endorsed by the apostle, affirms a certain kinship as subsisting between God and man—a conception similar to that of man made in the image of God. To be sure, Paul here seems to be speaking of a "physical relation—the 'offspring' of the heathen poets," of which Dr. Watson affirms that it is almost a stupidity to explain that Jesus is not thinking when he speaks of Fatherhood. This may be so; but it remains true that, if we are to find the doctrine of the universal sonship of men taught in the New Testament, we must find it in this utterance of Paul; for it appears, as the result of an exhaustive examination of the passages in point, that the doctrine can by no stretch of honest and intelligent exegesis be possibly found anywhere else. Accordingly it turns out that here, too, as in reference to the universal divine Fatherhood, it is not Christ, as is so often and emphatically asserted, who champions the doctrine; it is found, if found at all, only in the teachings of the apostle.

This survey of the passages treating of the sonship of men is, as might have been anticipated, even more decisive than the examination of the passages in which God is called Father. God can more appropriately be compared to a good father than mankind as a whole to good children. He realizes the highest ideal of fatherly tenderness and love; men in general do not realize the ideal of filial devotion. It is, therefore, not surprising that we have found a few passages in which the universal Fatherhood of God seems to be asserted or implied; it is almost surprising that such passages are so few. But those which speak of men as the children of God, without an exception, clearly and unequivocally limit the application of it to a part of the human race. And, contrary to the representation which has been persistently made, this limitation is made by no one else so emphatically and unmistakably as by Jesus Christ himself.

But some persons may at this point object that, in the survey of the scriptural teaching on the matter in question, I have forgotten the most important item of biblical evidence bearing on the Fatherhood of God, viz., the parable of the prodigal son. No, I have not forgotten it; and I also do not forget that it is almost the only dependence of those who undertake to prove that in the Bible all men, whatever their character may be, are called children of God. But I furthermore remember the good old maxim, that a parable must not be made to run on all fours. It would indeed be a singular thing if Jesus had intended by a parable to contradict or correct what he had said in his more direct teaching. Just what the interpretation and application of a parable should be depends on the light which comes from the ordinary and more doctrinal utterances, not *vice versa*.

Now, that the parable in question was designed to convey a lesson concerning the attitude of God towards men, no one doubts. But we give it this application because of the general drift of Jesus' positive teachings; the parable itself makes no such application of itself. It immediately follows the parables about the lost sheep and the lost piece of money. And the occasion of giving them is explained by the statement, "And both the Pharisees and the Scribes murmured, saying, This man receiveth

sinners and eateth with them." There can be no doubt that the three parables all had one purpose, viz., to rebuke the uncharitableness and narrow-mindedness of the objectors. Christ aimed to teach the all-comprehensive love of God, and to lift his hearers above the notion that the divine favor is limited to the Jews as a race, or, among the Jews themselves, to a chosen few. Especially did he aim to expose the haughty self-righteousness of the Pharisees, just as he did by the parable of the Pharisee and the publican (Luke 18:9-14). This, now, being granted, it may be said, If it is conceded that the father in the parable represents God, does not that prove that God is the universal Father, and that all men are his children? Not at all, unless, reasoning in the same way, we are to infer from the first parable that God is a real shepherd to all men, and that all men are literal sheep. God is indeed called a shepherd in the Old Testament; and everyone feels the beauty and pertinency of the designation. But if, on the strength of this parable, one should undertake to derive a doctrine of the essential shepherdhood of God and the essential sheephood of men, we should begin to inquire into his sanity. Still worse would be the case, if, in interpreting the second parable, one should infer the essential womanhood of God and the essential coinhood of man. In the third parable Jesus, instead of illustrating his doctrine by a shepherd and sheep, or by a woman and her coins, tells a story in which a father and a son figure as the leading characters. The same truth is taught as before. But why must we insist on doing here what, in the other two cases, would be impossible and absurd? Precisely the same lesson might have been taught by a story of a wife deserting her husband and afterwards returning in penitence and being graciously received back by her husband. But we should not therefore conclude that husbandhood is "the final idea" of God, or wifehood that of men. Yet such a conclusion would be as legitimate as to infer from the parable of the prodigal son that God is literally the father of all men, and that all men are literally the children of God. If there are elsewhere express declarations of the alleged real Fatherhood of God, well and good; but a *parable* can be made to furnish neither proof

nor disproof of it. Such literalness of interpretation would at once defeat itself. If, because the prodigal is called a son, we must say that all men are children of God, then the question arises, whom the elder son in the parable represents. He was a *son*, surely, as much as the younger one was. By what right is the younger son made to stand for all mankind, leaving nobody for the elder son to stand for? And if by some device we can divide the world into the two classes represented by the two sons, we should still have the "citizens" whose swine the prodigal son tended, the "friends" of the elder son, and the "servants" of the father, to say nothing of the swine themselves and the fatted calf. Whom do they stand for? According to the literalness of interpretation, which forgets that in an extended parable much is to be regarded as only the costume of the story, and insists that the son, or the sons, of the parable must represent all men as being sons of God, it would follow that, since these other personages in the parable are not sons of the old man, and yet must stand for certain classes of mankind, God is after all father only to some men, but not to all! And so the very doctrine which the parable has been supposed to teach turns out to be contradicted by it.

We need not for a moment deny that there is a *peculiar* fitness in likening God to a father. The figure is a natural one; but still it is a figure, just as when God is called shepherd, husband, rock, or shield. What needs to be resolutely protested against is the attempt to treat a figure as if it were not a figure—the attempt to make out that, while the *other* names applied to God are to be understood as figurative, *this* one of father is to be taken as literal, and as embodying a profound metaphysical truth concerning the relation of God to men. It is inferred from it that man is "consubstantiated with God." We are told that man by nature sustains an "indestructible filial relation to the Infinite," and that the consciousness of this relation "is the condition without which an appreciation of Christian morality is not even possible." This means that sonship to God is for every man a literal fact, an inalienable connection with God, which must be described by the term "sonship," and can be expressed

by no other. A metaphysical dogma is deduced from a figure of speech; and then it is insisted that this dogma can be rejected only at the peril of making the natural man a mere animal, and shutting out from him the possibility of ever becoming anything else!

The foregoing discussion has indicated what the general fact is as to the scriptural doctrine concerning the Fatherhood of God. With hardly an exception the term "Father" is applied to God only with reference to those who in a special sense are represented as his people. In the Old Testament God is often spoken of as a Father to the Jewish people. In the New Testament he is called the Father of those who are united by faith to his Son Jesus Christ. As Abraham is called "the father of all them that believe" (Rom. 4:11), so God, in a still higher sense, is the Father of the faithful. And as Christ said to the unbelieving Jews that they were not Abraham's children, because they did not the works of Abraham (John 8:39), so he told them that they were not the children of God, because they did not love him whom God had sent (vs. 42). Sonship, according to the uniform teaching of Christ and his apostles, consists in a *spiritual* kinship with God, which begins, not with the natural birth, but with the new, the supernatural, birth. "Except a man be born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God" (John 3:3). It is those who love their enemies who *become* the sons of the heavenly Father (Matt. 5:45). "As many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Rom. 8:14). Now, however, we are told that this consistent representation of Christ and the writers of the New Testament must be abandoned, and that we must substitute for it the doctrine that all men, whether regenerated or not, are the children of God. And this we are required to do on the ground of a certain *interpretation* of one parable—an interpretation which conflicts with the teaching of Christ everywhere else, as well as with the teachings of his apostles. Instead of interpreting the parable in accordance with the plainer and unmistakable purport of all the rest of the New Testament, we are actually told that everything in the New Testament which conflicts, or seems to conflict, with the doctrine of

the universal Fatherhood of God and the universal sonship of men must be interpreted, or corrected, according to the *alleged* meaning of this parable !

The conclusion of the whole matter is not hard to find. God being the Maker and Benefactor of men, he may fitly be likened to a father, and be called the Father of all men. The Bible lends some countenance to this wide application of the term, though its ordinary use of the appellation is a restricted one. If, then, God may properly be called the Father of all, it seems natural and fitting that all men should be called children of God. And, properly understood, there can be no objection to this. As the objects of God's creation, benefaction, and love, all men sustain a relation to God analogous to that of children to a father. Even without positive biblical warrant, such a usage would be justifiable. It must, however, be insisted that it is not the biblical usage. Nowhere, unless in one somewhat questionable passage, are men in general called in the Bible children of God. The allegation that this universal sonship of men is a biblical doctrine recently discovered, or rediscovered, is utterly baseless. And when, on the strength of this alleged discovery, the Fatherhood of God and the sonship of men, instead of being taken as figurative designations of a relation between God and men which has always been known and recognized, are set up as exact scientific statements of a profound ontological truth concerning man and God which can be expressed in no other way—then it is proper to enter an emphatic protest in the name of clear thought and sound exegesis. What there is true in the doctrine is not new ; and what there is new in it is not true.